

ROSS FELLER



X/WINDS

- (1) **Triple Threat** (1994, rev. 2006) for three soloists and an ensemble of nine 7:29  
Oberlin Conservatory Contemporary Music Ensemble  
Tim Weiss, director
- (2) **Still Adrift** (2013) for piano and electroacoustic sound 7:16  
Adam Tandler, piano
- (3) **Bypassing the Ogre** (2006) for solo trumpet 5:06  
Peter Evans, trumpet
- (4) **Disjecta** (2006) for percussion ensemble 14:10  
Oberlin Percussion Group  
Michael Rosen, director
- (5) **Sfumato** (2006) for violin, bass clarinet, and electroacoustic sound 9:27  
Ensemble Luna Nova  
Helen Kim, violin  
Ted Gurch, bass clarinet
- (6) **Retracing** (2009) for violin and electroacoustic sound 8:37  
Dorothy Martirano, violin
- (7) **Glossolalia** (2002) for solo cello 6:58  
Franklin Cox, cello
- (8) **X/Winds** (2008) for symphonic wind ensemble 11:02  
Oberlin Conservatory Wind Ensemble  
Tim Weiss, director

Total: 70:06



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The work on this album was composed over a productive period of two decades. Taken as a whole, one might notice certain consistencies or inconsistencies. If there is a throughline, an Ariadne's thread, found in these eight works, it might have to do with marginal expression, resonance, or thorny, angular gestures that map out a registral terrain. Each piece attempts to challenge at least one compositional given or supposition, exploring the questions raised more so than positing stable answers.

I have been fortunate to have worked with some very fine ensembles, performers, and soloists, and wish to thank them all for tackling often challenging and difficult work. I hope that they found the effort to be engaging and rewarding. And I hope that you, listener, will find that your time was worthwhile, perhaps inspiring you to posit or create as you see fit.

One of my teachers once asked me a provocative question that seems even more relevant today than ever before: So much music has been written and is currently being written, why write any more? If the pieces on this disc supply, at the very least, provisional answers to this question, I will view my mission as the composer of these works, to be a success.

- Ross Feller

## THE MUSIC OF ROSS FELLER

By Robert Carl

The music of Ross Feller confronts head-on a question that resonates from the 20th century into this one, a question that all composers confront, whether directly or not. What to do with modernism? That may seem dated or even irrelevant, but really it's not. Even though we now live in an age of unimaginable pluralism, and though the wave of Postmodernism has swept away the homogeneity and orthodoxy of High Modernism, especially as practiced after the Second World war, any composer worth her or his salt needs to still consider their relationship to the enormous treasure-house of inventive, boundary-breaking techniques and aesthetics that characterized the entire century before. This was a no-holds-barred flowering, a period which may well go down as one of the most exciting and fertile of Western civilization so far. To deny its gifts is to cut oneself off from a fount of tools and ideas that liberate the creative imagination to go wherever it desires.

But of course there's a stumbling block, in that one aspect of modernism, serialism (and in particular integral or total serialism) hijacked the movement, at least in the U.S.A. Followers of Arnold Schoenberg and Anton von Webern (interestingly, less so for Alban Berg) gained positions of power and influence, especially in educational institutions and tended to enforce a narrow interpretation of the term. And younger composers felt increasingly alienated from what seemed a conservative stance (it was the 60s and 70s after all). This is ironic, as modernism was launched as a radical and revolutionary movement. But its increasingly "establishmentarian" vibe undercut those roots. As a consequence, new counterforces, in the guise of minimalism, neo-romanticism, eclectic postmodernism, and even serialism's cousin, experimentalism, all rose up to challenge the hegemony. As a result, modernism got tarred and feathered in the eyes of composers, performers, critics, and above all the audience—which was mostly looking for any excuse to avoid it and follow far less challenging fare.

And so we reach this moment, and the issue with which a composer such as Feller has to grapple—if you want to make music that’s fresh and challenging, that still breaks through limits, how do you do it? How do you satisfy your curiosity and perhaps engage audiences that aren’t experienced with advanced art, but also aren’t afraid of having their ears stretched?

Feller represents an answer to the challenge that comes from several different angles. But the one we should emphasize from the outset is that he’s a performer, a virtuosic saxophonist, and so is deeply engaged with music in a visceral way. He understands and appreciates the *physicality* of making it. Add to this his love of, and commitment to, improvisation in a host of styles and media, the immersion in the performative moment, and the experience of risk in every split-second decision. If he asks performers to perform unusual tasks, make sounds outside their traditional practice, it’s because he’s been there. So they can trust the demands he places upon them, and audiences should trust the authenticity of the art with which he confronts them.

This opening essay won’t attempt a detailed exegesis of the pieces, or even describe all of them: the composer, appropriately, has provided detailed notes for that purpose. Rather I want to set the stage for how to approach and appreciate this music. And I want to show how listeners from a variety of backgrounds can engage with Feller’s work, shedding any inhibitions that might result from its initial unfamiliarity.

From the outset, Feller sees his music as an unapologetic field of play with important intellectual forces of our time. Science in the form of new physics and genetic biology, and philosophy embodied in poststructuralist thought are just some of the influences that shape his work. We’ll get to the actual sound in a moment, but it’s important to realize that the *flow* of Feller’s music doesn’t conform to the usual narrative and architectural structures of the Western classical tradition. *Triple Threat* is based on ideas of rupture as a way to paradoxically create a strongly sensed form. And in *X/Winds* the music suddenly relaxes and opens into a single giant exhalation over its final

three minutes, a gesture that suddenly casts all that occurred before in a new light. The idea that break and deterioration can be as much a part an artwork as unity and growth is new, yet it resonates with so much we experience and now discover in the world.

From the deep structure of the piece to the sonic surface, we move appropriately from the abstract to the profoundly concrete. Feller sees *sound itself* as a primary material of his music, no matter how rigorously he structures pitch and rhythm. Sound is bent and smeared, layers bleed into one another and then detach. Instruments overlap and create morphing meta-instruments. All this is guided both by a scrupulous ear *and* by the metaphysical programs animating the flow. For example, in *Disjecta*, the transitions from one timbral model to another are handled so that one senses color is the medium by which modulations occur, rather than harmony (appropriate when one has as many unpitched instruments in the ensemble as is the case here). I find myself thinking of two composers, quite different, yet both “maverick late modernists”: Brian

Ferneyhough and Giacinto Scelsi. From the former (whom Feller has studied extensively) one finds the intellectual quest that takes the music in new formal directions; from the latter comes the world of pulsing and morphing sounds.

And with sound comes silence. As John Cage posited at the very outset of his career, they are two sides of the same coin, sharing time in common. And Cage also proved that silence is never truly silent, there is always *something* there in what we only think is aurally empty. The way the music pauses or seems to stop can create an entirely different set of expectations for us listeners than the norm. *Still Adrift* projects this concept beautifully, as the often blank backdrop allows the smallest sounds and gestures to suddenly resonate.

And tied to this love of musical space, opened up by silence, is also the use of electroacoustic resources. Several of these works use technology, but Feller is a very savvy composer who uses it *only as much as needed*. Often the effects are quite subtle, but their impact is vast. Returning to *Still Adrift*, the backdrop of

faint harmonics creates a dreamlike aura around the live instrument. It is almost as though the piece is a series of fragments of another piece, already finished, which we are now resurrecting in our memory. Or take *Sfumato*: when I first listened to the piece I assumed there was also a chamber ensemble accompanying the two soloists. No, it's the fixed media, whose gentle presence saturates musical space, opens it up, and gives the piece unexpected breadth.

And finally, returning to Feller's performing practice, there is the spirit of improvisation. Examining the scores as I prepared this essay, I was struck by how almost all the pieces are precisely notated. But the *spirit* of improvisation, of the crazy, surprising, even shocking turn, animates so much of this music, and gives it a sense of exhilarating freedom. *Sfumato* and *Retracing* each evoke this risk-taking creative frenzy. And for me the greatest example of all is *Bypassing the Ogre*. A solo trumpet piece is one of the hardest to pull off. One can of course rely on volume, fanfares, and other martial gestures. But Feller instead creates a far wider sound spectrum to explore, one that involves

vocal interjections and noises, carefully woven into the overall fabric. It's a wild ride, and I think any listener will be happy to join it.

These are not the usual moves of Big Bad Modernism. Improvisation? Electro-acoustic music that doesn't overwhelm us with notes, or explanations of complex algorithms? Sudden spacious openings in the midst of chaos? A formal dialectic that roams beyond hermetic, self-enclosed structures, taking in a world of ideas and even embracing contradiction and paradox? Feller proves that the idea of exploring new worlds, of breaking molds isn't dead at all. Modernism for him is a tradition of freedom and experiment, mixed with an intellectual armature of rigor and paradox. For listeners who have grown up with indie rock, free improv, industrial noise, this will be familiar terrain. Likewise those who like their art with a dash of conceptualism and philosophy will find plenty to satisfy their appetite. Dig in.

- Robert Carl is chair of the composition program at the Hartt School, University of Hartford, and the author of Terry Riley's In C.

## PROGRAM NOTES

**TRIPLE THREAT** for B<sup>b</sup> clarinet, trumpet, and violin soloists, and nine instruments was composed by mapping labyrinth and meander patterns onto various musical parameters. Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's three fractured lines (break, crack, and rupture), which they conceived in their book *A Thousand Plateaus* (in reference to Pierre Boulez's smooth and striated spaces) were employed in order to disturb the mappings. *Triple Threat* requires a high level of instrumental technique, especially in the solo parts which were written especially for three maverick, virtuoso performers living in Urbana, Illinois: clarinetist Paul Zonn, trumpeter Ray Sasaki, and violinist Dorothy Martirano. The two percussion parts include a jazz/rock set player pitted against an orchestral percussionist, both inspired by the work of Frank Zappa. Shortly after beginning this piece, Paul Zonn was diagnosed with a fatal illness that eventually took his life in 2000. At the time I could not imagine this composition without Paul's participation. Hence, it was not performed until 2006, after some revision.

I consider this piece to be one of my earliest pivotal works. It explores a musical terrain endowed with a series of opposed multiplicities, featuring eclectic, borderline materials and states in which the soloists and various ensemble constellations often compete for the listener's attention. Some of the materials are deliberately obscured with masking techniques such as pitch and timbral overlapping, while others achieve similar results through sheer brute force.

*Triple Threat* begins with several chords sharply attacked in an unpredictable manner. Each chord is comprised of specific textural densities and ensemble combinations that are reused and continually realigned throughout the piece. Other material trajectories that are initiated in the first section include the opposition of sustained chords against unstable constellations of marcato material, the layering and stratification of disparate textures, and rapid timbral shifts. The two percussionists begin to battle each other, while also mischievously collaborating in a combined effort to dominate the soloists at several important junctures. In the



second section the texture thins out leaving the soloists by themselves. Eventually temporary alliances are formed that culminate in an all-out, string section barrage accompanied by soft sustains in the winds. The percussion and brass re-enter, providing additional layers of material that set-up a short time-warp section without strings, with the clarinet as soloist. The next section reuses introductory material but in a diffused and fragmented manner, the instability of which is followed by a spectrum of pulsed patterns from highly motoric to the most chaotic, in a short span of time. This, in turn, is cut short in order to feature the three soloists in simultaneous solos. The rest of the ensemble re-emerges first as background and then instigates a series of kaleidoscopic layers that rapidly shift from one instrumental combination to the next by the beginning of the last section. Two-thirds of the ensemble becomes briefly fixated upon one pitch-class, which is passed around like a trophy. The percussionists clamor to have the last say in a short dueling barrage but are rapidly cut off by the last tutti chord, which is itself dispatched by one of the percussionists.

**STILL ADRIFT** was commissioned and premiered by New York City based pianist Adam Tandler for his 2013 concert at Roulette in Brooklyn, New York. This piece includes a fixed, electroacoustic part that serves to amplify the live piano's resonance, and was constructed from resynthesized samples of the piano. Standard processing techniques were applied in order to boost or attenuate various frequency formants, and to suggest the sense of a virtual acoustic space. At times during the piece the performer is asked to negotiate idiosyncratic physical gestures that can only be realized on the piano. The title refers to those uneasy times in life when one's moorings become undone, casting adrift the senses of security and prediction, and the impression of temporal suspension or stillness that can accompany the perception of unravelment.

**BYPASSING THE OGRE** was written for the New York City trumpeter Peter Evans. Many of the gestures employed in this piece are extensions of those developed by virtuoso trumpet improvisers such as Mr. Evans. In addition to traditional ap-

proaches to pitch production, the trumpet is used as a resonator for vocal and air stream sounds, some of which intentionally target various thresholds of expression and perception. The piece is unencumbered by bar lines in order to gain maximum fluidity and some decisions of pacing are left up to the player. The gestural materials oscillate between specific and indeterminate pitches and rhythms that take place within given durations, or as ornamental figures.

**DISJECTA** is the term Samuel Beckett used to describe a collection of his miscellaneous, peripheral, and fragmentary works. My percussion quintet began life as an unfinished solo written for Chicago-based percussionist Steven Butters. Materials were extracted from this torso that ultimately became part of ten textural 'fields' used in the quintet. I worked with the idea of material tracers that appear, or disappear, as they modify and/or mask resonance. This piece also seeks to explore the pathways created by independent rhythmic trajectories that evolve organically, even as they are harnessed, or funnelled, by large-scale formal concerns. The

five parts are separated into collaborating and competing pairs, and a lone performer who occupies the spatial, if not the axial, center of the piece. This work is dedicated to Michael Rosen and the Oberlin Percussion Group.

**SFUMATO** (from the Italian term *sfumare*, meaning "to tone down" or "to evaporate like smoke") was inspired by a painting technique used by Leonardo da Vinci and others, to make subtle, seamless variations between contrasting areas of light and dark. The smoke-like fuzziness of this effect decreases the sense that a still image is entirely still. Hence, there is a vague sense of movement. My utilization of this technique was attempted through the use of common tones, shared pitch spaces (enhanced and made fuzzier by the use of microtones), timbral modifications, and resonance reinforcement largely provided by the electroacoustic accompaniment, which texturally and timbrally frames the live instruments.

**RETRACING** exists in two versions: a collaborative work for solo dancer, violin, electroacoustic sound, and textiles, and

a concert work for solo violinist and electroacoustic sound. *Retracing* was originally created for the DanceWorks series at the Cleveland Public Theatre. It was choreographed by Kora Radella, and performed by dancer Julie Brodie and violinist Dorothy Martirano, along with textiles by Rebecca Cross. I worked closely with the choreographer in an effort to produce a truly collaborative piece. The violinist performs gestural materials that support, enhance, and serve as counterpoint to the dancer's movements. As I composed the violin part I thought about developing analogous sounds to movement concepts such as: sweep, chop, pendulum, radiate, and fall. Additionally, the way the textiles were illuminated influenced my approach to dynamic-dependent resonance. The electroacoustic part primarily serves to reinforce various harmonics found in the violin part, as well as to assist with spatialization and depth effects.

Commissioned by Craig Hultgren, **GLOS-SOLALIA** suggests the hazards of hap gibberish and language-like music. The utterance itself is cut loose from its ball-and-chain relationship to the intelligible.

Unfettered, it floats above recognition to an Other, sacred discovery. The gift of ecstatic tongues offered as a piece of music. Edification through utter gibberish. The ancient Israelites did it. The ancient Greeks did it. So too the Quakers, Shakers, Jansenists, and the Methodists.

**X/WINDS** is cast in a single-movement form, with a few notable pauses and hiccups. It is a celebration of life through a web of ecstatic, textural densities. The opening presents a spectral gesture that quickly dissolves into a series of dialectically related materials. In the first section, stable elements are continually, yet unpredictably, accosted by unbalanced fragments crying out for change. The engagement with peripheral or marginal materials is no mere fetishization, but an essential, human articulation of a multitude of contradictory (eternally repeating outside-time) impulses. The fracture, or crack, that initializes the first section throws out splintered possibilities in many directions at once. One particularly salient example, that sets the stage for the rest of the piece, occurs immediately after the initial tutti chord, as the piano

becomes ensnared in a series of expanding and contracting nets of pitches and rhythms, separated into distinct registral bandwidths. At the same time, the other instruments trace their own sonic decays up to, and eventually beyond, the permeable border between pitch and timbre. The piano's non-accompanimental accompaniment to the ensembles collective decay is further developed in each principle part's engagement with the same set of constraints. This continues into the second section, but is fleshed out with additional entanglements and derailments. Small instrumental groups cluster together in brief, short-lived alliances. Some are in rhythmic unison, others hocket in complex tuplet relationships. Eventually, toward the middle of the second section, fourteen instruments drop out leaving an unlikely quartet that features mythical, separate-but-equal approaches to material elaboration. The third section begins in marked contrast. The top winds sound out different contour trajectories, yet they are similarly shut down by material bottlenecks that hold up the structural progress of the piece, while simultaneously redirecting

its flow. Conflicts between the various contradictory impulses build to a frenzy by the end of the third section. As if under intense magnification, the fourth section takes up the resonant trails from the preceding section, but close-up, in an extremely time-expanded form. In a way the structural trajectories have become so entangled in what might be called the forsaken path pile-up, that the piece's forward momentum almost grinds to a halt, almost, but not quite. And this makes all the difference. One might notice many opportunities for mayhem in this section. We're left with a vision of how things could be. Gasping for air, the sparrow is blown backward into the future (like Klee's angel), untranslatably insisting on escaping from an historical straitjacket - a parable for our times, no?

## BIOGRAPHY



**ROSS FELLER** is an accomplished composer, theorist, saxophonist, improviser, and educator. Over the past twenty years he has developed a unique musical vocabulary that features raw, ecstatic layers of material that percolate with refined, virtuosic gestures, often integrated with performance gestures. Feller grew up near Chicago, where he came into contact with composers and performers from a thriving avant-garde jazz scene,

including the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians) and an equally thriving new music scene, including New Music Chicago. While still in high school Feller began to systematically explore the boundaries of his instrument through improvisation, and experiment with various compositional techniques. He co-founded the Chicago-based, avant-garde, jazz-rock ensemble Dot Dot Dot, and later, Double Edge Dance with choreographer Kora Radella.

Feller holds DMA and MM degrees in Composition and Theory from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he studied with Salvatore Martirano, Morgan Powell, and Paul Zonn, and a BM in Composition from the American Conservatory of Music, Chicago, where he studied with Darleen Cowles. Currently, he teaches composition, theory, and computer music at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, and has also taught at the Oberlin College Conservatory of Music, Georgia College and State University, and at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Feller's awards and honors include the Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award for Composition, ASCAP Young Composer's Competition, Gaudeamus Foundation International Composer's Competition, and Bent Frequency's International Call for Scores. He has received commissions and performances by ensembles including the Oberlin Conservatory Contemporary Music Ensemble, Oberlin Percussion Group, Prism Saxophone Quartet, Aurelia Saxophone Quartet, Goliard Ensemble, Ensemble Luna Nova, International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), Kenyon College Symphonic Wind Ensemble, members of the Cleveland Orchestra and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, and performers such as saxophonist Taimur Sullivan, trumpeters Peter Evans and Stephanie Richards, trombonist Steven Parker, violinist Dorothy Martirano, 'cellists Franklin Cox and Craig Hultgren, double bassist Michael Cameron, guitarist Nick Didkovsky, and pianists Cory Smythe and Adam Tandler.

Feller's work has been performed throughout the U.S.A. and in Europe at venues including Symphony Space (New

York City), Roulette (Brooklyn), De Ijsbreker (Amsterdam), Spoleto (Charleston, South Carolina), Eyedrum (Atlanta), Krannert Center (Urbana), Presser Recital Hall (Philadelphia) Park West (Chicago), Preston Bradley Hall (Chicago), Cleveland Public Theatre, Gund Gallery (Gambier, Ohio), Green Mill (Chicago), Spectrum (New York City), Plateau (Brussels) and at many national and international festivals, conferences, and universities. Recent, evening-length performances of his compositions have taken place at Spectrum and Roulette.

Feller's work has been written about in *Time Out New York*, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Reader*, and *Wall Street Journal*. Recordings of his music are available on New Dynamic Records, Athena Records, and UIUC Experimental Music Studios. In 2015 he and fellow saxophonist Frank Mauceri released a collaborative cd entitled *Chiasmus*. For more information visit: [www.rossfeller.com](http://www.rossfeller.com).

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